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ABSTRACT

A study examined how knowledgeable school administrators are about reading programs in their schools and if they are "doing what they are supposed to be doing." Subjects were administrators of 20 elementary schools who completed a 10-page questionnaire entitled "Reading Survey for Administrators." Results indicated that all administrators do not share the same definition of reading and/or perception of the importance of reading in the overall curriculum. Most think of it as a combination of reading, writing, and thinking--with teachers and central office personnel establishing goals. Findings revealed that administrators differed in their perception of which aspects of reading are most important. Many felt that comprehension was most important while others chose decoding or phonics. Distrust of basal texts was apparent, since most felt supplemental reading texts were necessary for effective reading programs. Comprehension levels seemed to be the target in assessing the teaching of reading. When evaluating reading programs, the administrators report concentrating on observing the teacher, class activities, materials being used, and finally, the behavior of the students. (CR)

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Running head: PRINCIPALS AND READING PROGRAMS

What Do Principals Think About Their Reading Programs?

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Introduction

The building administrator is the person responsible for insuring that school programs are managed and coordinated in a way that insures student success and optimum outcome. Researchers have compiled lists of the various roles they feel administrators can and should assume in the administration of programs such as reading (Carbo & Cole, 1995; Carbo, 1995; Lickteig, et. al., 1995; and Wepner, Feeley & Strickland, 1995). Elements of successful reading programs themselves have been identified and studied (Burns, Roe and Ross, 1992 and Vacca, Vacca & Gove, 1987). But are administrators doing what they are suppose to be doing? Additionally, how knowledgable are they about the reading program. This article describes a study that explains elements of selected current urban reading programs and offers a limited explanation of how knowledgeable the administrators are about the reading process. Some areas of strength and weakness in the current programs are identified.

Administrators of 20 local elementary schools were asked to complete a ten item questionnaire entitled, "Reading Survey for Administrators". The questionnaire was validated by a panel of experts in reading and administration. The responses were totalled and each item analyzed separately. Specific areas addressed by the questionnaire were the following:

1. The elements or make-up of current reading programs.
2. The goal setting process in established programs.
3. Which area or aspect of reading is considered most important.
4. What administrators look for when evaluating reading instruction.
5. How reading is supported in schools by administrators.

Results

The six choices mentioned in the item asking principals *to identify the elements of their reading programs* came from the district curriculum guide for reading K-12. Only six respondents chose all of the possible responses. Reading was the most popular selection followed by writing and listening. Thinking was the next most popular element followed by speaking and skill, drill and practice. Only one administrator chose the "other" option and mentioned spelling and language arts tied in with a commercially developed reading program. When responding to the question of *who sets the reading goals for their schools*, the administrators felt that both downtown administrators and teachers were responsible. Some felt that the building principal set the goals while others chose Student Needs, chose Parents, chose the School Board and surprisingly none chose the Area Directors (these are the immediate supervisors of the building principals and are in very close contact with them).

In *ranking aspects of reading in order of their importance*, the administrators chose Comprehension most often followed by Decoding. They viewed Phonics next in importance followed by Vocabulary, then Grammar and finally Spelling. The selections that composed the aspects of reading were taken from the local district curriculum guide in reading.

When asked *upon whom they rely for advice about reading* instead of going to their immediate supervisor, the Area Director, the majority of administrators chose the Reading Supervisor and the Individual Reading Teacher. The Building Principal was chosen by two respondents, indicating that perhaps these were the responses of Assistant Principals completing the questionnaire. Student/ Parent was selected by only one respondent as was the Curriculum

Leader.

In *selecting materials essential to effective reading programs* the administrators felt that Supplemental Texts were absolutely necessary and therefore Basal Texts would not stand alone. Library Books received the next highest number of responses with Paperbacks and even Comic Books considered important by some respondents.

The administrators indicated they *had completed coursework in reading and had classroom experience in reading and had attended workshops and seminars*. Professional Reading was claimed by some respondents while only a small number has attended Professional Growth Institute classes -- self improvement courses conducted by the district.

Three statements out of four about reading theory divided the administrators. The concept of encouraging children to sound out words they didn't know was the only one that they agreed on. The three questions dividing respondents almost evenly dealt with changes in levels of comprehension, dividing words into syllables and guessing at unknown words. The last three items on the questionnaire called for short, fill-in answers. The following responses show *what administrators look for when they evaluate reading* during classroom visits:

- planning/organization for meaningful skill development
- children's enthusiasm
  children's comprehension
  variety of instructional materials
  teacher's skill in presenting
- teacher planning/preparation/organization
  pre-reading activities
  questions asked
  student motivation
  teacher skill

- purpose of lesson
  student attention and response
  variety of materials
  follow-up assignments
- discussion and comprehension
- time-on-task actually reading
- a knowledgeable teacher with good teaching techniques
- application of phonics

Four categories emerged from the responses of administrators addressing project evaluation. When evaluating reading programs the administrators report concentrating on observing the teacher, activities of the class, materials being used and finally the behavior of the students. These responses indicate administrative concern for adequate planning and teacher skills or expertise in reading. Additionally, comprehension seems to be the target of the administrators in assessing the teaching of reading. Several of the administrators regard the amount of in-class reading time as crucial. The following responses were obtained when administrators answered the question regarding how they support the reading program in their schools:

Principals support by:

- buying all materials requested by teachers
- ordering materials appropriately for reading staff
  planning in-service about staff/student concerns
  as reflected in progress reports, standardized tests
- constructive criticism
  my own reading in the classroom and letting students
  come to my office and read to me
  providing a variety of materials for teachers to use

- staying aware of student progress
  talking with teachers, parent, students
  providing supplies

- individual meetings with teachers, in-service
  securing materials to improve reading program

- resources
  money

- providing in-service
  listening to children read
  visiting the classroom

- encouraging student reading
  being available to assist

- supervising the program
  providing the needed materials

- by providing materials, supplies and other supplemental
  assistance as needed

- providing a strong program in the library

- making sure everyone has enough and all materials
  checking lesson plans
  visiting classrooms and getting feedback

- asking students to read to me

The majority of respondents felt they best support their reading programs by supplying materials. Additionally, support was needed in the areas of organizing in-service and supervising or overseeing the reading program.

To answer how the administrators support their reading programs the following emerges. It appears they view themselves in one or more of the following roles: supplier, mentor or

supervisor.

The last questionnaire item was designed to obtain general comments, but only two administrators responded:

- a good librarian is essential. Title I programs can be very good if they are well planned, supervised and staffed
- several of the questionnaire items are too vague and need to be clarified

It can be postulated that the low response rate to this item was due to the time of day that the questionnaire was administered: after a long day at school and right before a controversial item was to be discussed during the association meeting.

Summary

The questions guiding this investigation were: are the administrators doing what they are suppose to be doing and how knowledgeable are they about reading? To answer these questions administrators completed a survey questionnaire. The data obtained shows administrators do not share the same definition of reading. Most think of it as a combination of reading, writing and thinking. They feel teachers and central office personnel establish goals for reading programs. The administrators again differ in their perception of which aspects of reading are most important. Many felt that comprehension was most important while others chose decoding or phonics. When seeking advice, the administrators trusted teachers and reading supervisors not themselves or their bosses. Distrust of basal reading texts was apparent since most felt supplemental reading texts were necessary for effective reading programs. Most of the administrators claimed background in reading but were divided in their responses perhaps

indicating half were whole language oriented while the other half favored phonics. Four categories emerged from the responses of administrators addressing project evaluation: (1) teacher, (2) student, (3) class activities and (4) material being used. These responses indicate administrative concern for adequate planning and teacher skill in the actual teaching of reading. Additionally, comprehension levels seem to be the target of administrators in assessing the teaching of reading. Of the four categories of program evaluation -- the activities going on in the classroom -- seemed to generate the largest number of different responses. The majority of administrators felt they best support their reading programs by supplying materials. The number of varied responses points to the emerging category of administrator as a Supervisor rather than a Mentor or Supplier. One can speculate as to role changes of principals from administrators of programs to supervisors or perhaps mentors.

Responses to the questionnaire show the administrators as concerned professionals differing in their perception of the importance of reading in the overall curriculum and in their varied definitions of reading. These findings apply to the field of administrative leadership in reading in that the administrators felt that they were Suppliers but wanted to be and were qualified to be Mentors and in some cases Supervisors rather than Administrators.

The role perceptions of the principals differ greatly but most perceive themselves as possessing the positive characteristics of good reading leaders.

The following are implications for reading and administration:

1. Administrators appear to need more structure in their definition of reading.
2. The central office personnel could be used to free the building principals to visit other buildings housing successful reading programs.

3. Administrators could appoint/use persons to assist in leadership roles to produce more dramatic results for their programs.

4. Reading administrators could be using handbooks with checklists to lead their reading programs to avoid flying by the seat of their pants.

5. Workshops/in-service are needed to insure that their perceptions of reading are in line with the perceptions/definitions of the experts in the field.

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